

EXHIBIT 8

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'Are you QAnon?': One Trump official's brush with an internet cult gone horribly wrong

Some believed he was "Q," the mythical figure behind an intricate and sprawling conspiracy theory. Here Ezra Cohen-Watnick, a senior Trump intelligence official, shares the story of his ordeal for the first time.



In his first public comments on his ordeal, Ezra Cohen-Watnick, who goes by the name Ezra Cohen, detailed a nightmarish, two-year-long fight to extricate himself from the QAnon saga. | U.S. Department of Defense

By **JOSH GERSTEIN**

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The deadly insurrection in the nation's capital this month brought intense public scrutiny to the online conspiracy theory QAnon and shock about its pervasiveness, but one prominent Trump administration official said he's been battling the movement for years — pleading with his government colleagues and figures in the tech industry to recognize the real-world danger posed by the internet-based fantasy.

Since 2018, many members of the cult-like group have been convinced that its shadowy leader and founder is actually Ezra Cohen-Watnick, an intelligence specialist who worked in various Defense Department jobs before accepting a senior post on the National Security Council staff soon after President Donald Trump came into office in 2017. Cohen, who was brought in under former national security adviser Michael Flynn, became a figure of controversy when his run-ins with other intelligence officials spilled out into the press.

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Cohen's resulting notoriety led many adherents of QAnon to regard him as "Q," who according to the conspiracy theory's lore is a Trump administration official working on the inside to expose a deep-state cabal of pedophiles and Satan-worshippers bent on undermining Trump. Q's cryptic messages, posted in the form of "Q drops" in online forums, have also fueled an obsession with a coming "Storm" — an apocalyptic event that would expose the evildoers, bring the cabal to justice and cement Trump's hold on power.

“It’s clear that the QAnon conspiracy was a core of what was going on at the Capitol and I want to do everything I can to delegitimize this conspiracy,” Cohen, 34, told POLITICO in an interview. “The country deserved better on Jan. 6 — what transpired was appalling and completely at odds with our democratic principles.”

Many of those who stormed the Capitol openly espoused QAnon beliefs and appear to have become convinced that Trump’s drive to overturn his loss in the 2020 election would culminate in some kind of military-led intervention, ousting evil Democrats and ushering in a righteous new era.

Trump fueled the Capitol attack not only with his inflammatory words but through months of public flirtation with the bizarre online obsession — particularly when it seemed to bolster his re-election bid or advance his post-election campaign to challenge the election results.

Asked about the violence at the Capitol, as well as the role that Trump played in stoking it through his speech that day and the conspiracy talk he fomented in the weeks after the election, Cohen said: “The administration should have crushed this QAnon stuff as soon as it materialized.”



TECHNOLOGY

Twitter says it booted 70,000 QAnon accounts after attack on Capitol

BY LEAH NYLEN

In his first public comments on his ordeal, Cohen detailed a nightmarish, two-year-long fight to extricate himself from the QAnon saga. He said he’s speaking out now because he is again a private citizen, wrapping up his service as a

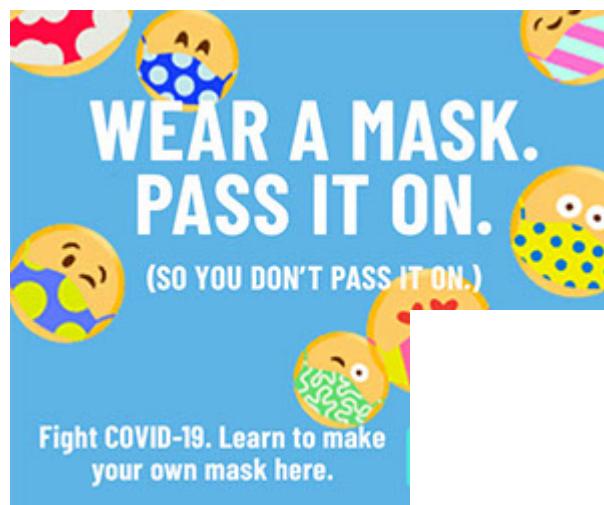
Trump appointee at the Pentagon, and because he is outraged over the tragic events of Jan. 6.

Cohen described being caught in a kind of ideological tag team as early speculation by right-wing QAnon followers that that he was Q evolved into left-wing obsession with proving that he was the fraudster behind the postings, in order to demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of a top Trump administration official.

The rumors eventually began to seep into his real-life world. He recalls being approached at a pre-Covid cocktail party in D.C. “Someone came up to me and said, whispering, ‘Are you QAnon?’” he said, calling the incident disturbing.

Online, Cohen faced a slew of social media accounts falsely purporting to be him, tweeting out cryptic messages to QAnon followers. He said Twitter was slow to address the problem.

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“Twitter did a horrible job of responding to this,” Cohen said. “Twitter is getting very aggressive about the QAnon stuff now. But for a very long time they allowed this to fester. And it's not like they didn't know about it — we reported it to them.”

Cohen became so concerned about the proliferation of accounts suggesting links to him that he hired Washington-based lawyer Mark Zaid to investigate

While the first accounts explicitly impersonated Cohen, the next wave were more subtle, set up under vague names like @YourFriendlyE. While those accounts never directly claimed to be Cohen, they would quickly be identified, falsely, as Cohen by other QAnon-focused accounts.

“It was a cat-and-mouse game,” he recalled. “Every time we had an account get shut down, they would re-form and re-gain up to 20,000 followers and even higher within hours. And there would be this chorus of people online saying, ‘This is the new account.’”

The accounts would then send cryptic, ominous messages that allegedly came from Cohen. “It is only at the precipice that true and lasting change will occur,” one tweet said. “In order to fully expose the ‘Invisible Enemy,’ we had to bait them into a very contentious, bright light.”

Cohen said those running the account seemed to have a sophisticated understanding of Twitter’s policies and were skilled at evading them for some time.

“It was very clear that they basically knew exactly what the Twitter impersonation rules were,” he said. “They never came out and actually used my name or put my picture as the profile picture. They knew exactly where the line was, to get taken down as an impersonator account.”

Some of the online activity began to bleed over into Cohen’s physical world in troubling ways. One Twitter account involved posted a close-up photo of his home.

“It wasn’t just from Google Streetview. It was as if somebody had been outside my house, and literally took a picture, looking in through my window,” he said. “I took it as a threat.”

Cohen also discovered that someone hacked into an old Hotmail account he no longer used and sought to use it verify other accounts. The intruder then used it to set up a meeting for Cohen with former National Security Agency employee Bill Binney, who has claimed that the hack of the Democratic

National Committee in 2016 was an inside job and was not orchestrated by Russia as the intelligence community concluded.

One unusual aspect of the planned coffee-shop meeting was that despite the purported “invite” to Binney, Cohen knew nothing about it.

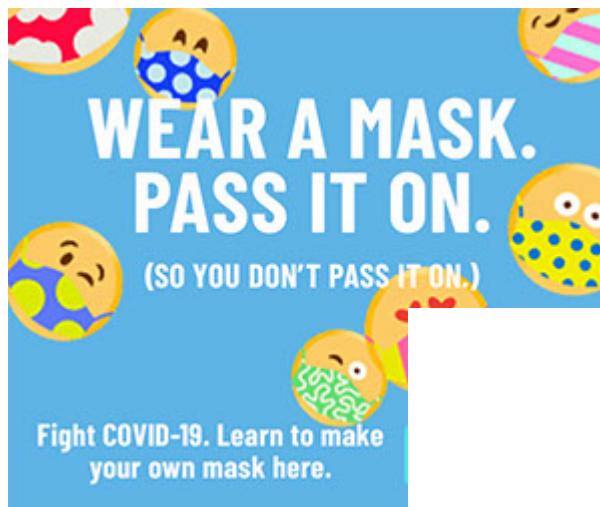
“The funny thing is, at the time, I wasn't even living in D.C. And I got a call from somebody saying, ‘Hey, you stood up Bill Binney.’ And I said, ‘What are you talking about?’” Cohen recalled. “You can imagine getting your email hacked into and having somebody lure people into coming to meet with you is very alarming.”

Cohen left the NSC in August 2017 and worked at Oracle for a time before returning to the Defense Department last May as a political appointee overseeing special operations. Even after that move, the internet posts continued, with some QAnon followers causing concern for Pentagon security officials by coming by to try to pay him a visit.

A spokesperson for Twitter defended the social media firm's handling of the QAnon onslaught Cohen faced.

“We've been clear that we will take strong enforcement action on behavior that has the potential to lead to offline harm, and we will permanently suspend accounts that are solely dedicated to sharing QAnon content,” Twitter spokesperson Trenton Kennedy said. “We recently permanently suspended more than 70,000 Twitter accounts engaging in this behavior, including many of the accounts you referenced. We will remain vigilant in our approach of detecting and fighting this behavior, including in reference to this specific individual.”

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However, Twitter did acknowledge that it stepped up its approach to QAnon-related accounts after the Capitol riot and found many instances of multiple accounts being run by a single person. The offending tweets Cohen shared with POLITICO are from accounts Twitter has permanently suspended, the firm said, while conceding that it won't unmask pseudonymous accounts.

Of course, QAnon did not rise to prominence solely based on social media activity, but also won followers by being promoted by high-profile figures in Trump circles.

One person who has emerged as a hero of sorts to the QAnon faithful is Flynn, whose tenure as national security adviser lasted a mere 25 days. QAnon backers rallied behind Flynn during his epic battle with prosecutors over false statements he initially admitted making to investigators, and the retired lieutenant general has returned the favor to the group, tweeting out QAnon memes as well as the QAnon slogan: Where we go one, we go all, or the hashtag #WWG1WGA.

Flynn effectively hired Cohen for the Trump White House in 2017. Cohen tried to reach out to Flynn through intermediaries to urge him to stop tweeting and retweeting QAnon content, a source familiar with the situation said. It didn't work, and Flynn returned to Trump's orbit in recent weeks as the president sought to overturn his election defeat.

Trump also gave QAnon oxygen — or at least did nothing to snuff it out.

At a televised town hall meeting on NBC in October, host Savannah Guthrie asked Trump to denounce the conspiracy theory. His muddled response was taken by many QAnon backers as an endorsement.

“I know nothing about it. I do know they are very much against pedophilia. They fight it very hard, but I know nothing about it,” Trump said.

Behind the scenes, Trump reportedly dismissed the notion that QAnon posed any danger and seemed willing to continue his public dalliance with the group.

“You know, people say they’re into all kinds of bad things and say all kinds of terrible things about them,” Trump said at a July meeting with top aides and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, [according to Axios](#). “But, you know, my understanding is they basically are just people who want good government.”

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Trump and aides also embraced fringe Republican candidates who spouted #QAnon theories, such as just-elected Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene. While some GOP leaders denounced Greene, in August, [Trump tweeted out a tribute to her](#), calling her “a future Republican star.” And just weeks before the election, he gave her a shout-out from the stage at a Georgia rally.

Asked about Trump’s role, Cohen responded in general terms, saying that many in the administration treated the conspiracy theory as amusing long after it passed that point.

Cohen, who specializes in countering influence of foreign adversaries like Russia and China, says the persistence and sophistication of some of those involved in QAnon have convinced him of a foreign presence in the movement.

“In my professional opinion, being in the intelligence world, it really appeared to be a foreign state actor or a very organized operation,” he said. “I just don’t see that level of sophistication as just an amateur thing.”

Cohen recently got a verified Twitter account, which he said he didn’t really want, simply in order to make it easier to swat down fake accounts. He knows that some of the fevered QAnon traffic about him has moved to Parler and other forums, but he said he won’t be setting up camp there just to try to drive others away.

“I absolutely refuse to go on these other platforms,” he said. “I mean, I’m just not going to do it.”

Cohen cleared out of his Pentagon office on Friday and says he’s now planning to take some time off. But his attorney noted that — despite Twitter’s crackdown — messages keep appearing on the platform suggesting that Cohen is hard at work pursuing Q goals and is perhaps even behind a coup that will take place on Inauguration Day.

“The two years we have spent trying to successfully disentangle Ezra from the sticky webs of QAnon conspiracists has required incredible efforts both behind the scenes and publicly,” said Zaid, who has sometimes represented POLITICO reporters in Freedom of Information suits. “This is a movement and ideology that needs to be directly confronted by our government and citizenry.”

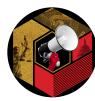
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